

ALEXANDER THE CONQUEROR

Ancient Greece Part III

The Boeotian plain, at the foothills of Mount Parnassus northwest of Athens, lay naked to withering summer sun. Only steps from the roadside the statue of a colossal marble lion some 28 feet high squatted on its haunches under the welcome shade of overhanging trees. Other than this apparently random statue, no other feature of the landscape, man-made or natural, betrayed that this had been the site of a desperate, bloody battle. Here in the hot August of 338 B.C., near the ancient town of Chaeronea, an alliance of Athenian, Theban, and other Greek forces was decisively defeated by Philip II, king of Macedonia, ruler of the rugged northern reaches of the Greek-speaking world. The fallen warriors from Thebes' legendary crack unit, the Sacred Band, true to their code of honor, had fought to the death and been buried in a common grave overseen by the monumental lion.

Commanding the Companion Cavalry, Macedonia's elite mounted unit, in this decisive campaign was King Philip's precocious 18-year-old son, Alexander. It was he who, taking advantage of a break in the enemy line, had led the attack against the Sacred Band. As promising as this debut performance was, few at the time could have guessed that in only 14 years Alexander would conquer the known world to the east and change the course of history.

A number of biographies of Alexander III of Macedon, the young man who came to be known as Magnus, or the Great, survive from ancient times, most written centuries after his death. From these sources come the familiar anecdotes that have been passed down through popular history: The young Alexander's taming of Bucephalas, the horse who became the loyal companion of his campaigns; the episode at Gordium, where Alexander solved the riddle of the Gordian knot, a rope so intricately knotted that local legend held that whoever could undo it would be lord of Asia (he cut it with his sword); his numerous acts of both savagery and gallantry in war. Even in the space of his own brief lifetime Alexander was a legend, and now, some 2,300 years after his death, he can seem at times more like a figure from mythology than the flesh and blood of history. For good or for ill he is one of a handful of men who in striding across the stage of life left the world marked forever by their presence.

Alexander's conquests opened up what is called the Hellenistic Age, dated from his death in 323 B.C. to 31 B.C., a period in which Greek culture spread through northern Africa and southwestern Asia, leaving remnants in Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, among other countries. The fusion of Greek, Persian, and other cultures colored every aspect of life: language, government, art, literature, and religion--little was left unchanged. The era can fairly be said to have been a first giant step toward an international culture.

At one time it was fashionable to credit Alexander with the vision to have forged this multicultural era. The reality, however, is that it is unlikely he ever intended these effects. His military genius is undisputed, but opinion is divided over his other traits. Everyone has his own Alexander.

A German biography published in 1949, for example, depicted Alexander as the heroic destroyer of the old order and creator of a new world state. For William Tarn, a British scholar of private means writing before World War II from the comfort of his Scottish estate, Alexander was a sort of decent sporting chap, very much like the English gentry.

"It is interesting that we agonize over Alexander in a way we do not over other conquerors, like Caesar," I was told by Frank Holt of the University of Houston. "We yearn to see something noble in him.

When I set out in search of Alexander, I knew in advance that I would never find him. But my hope was that he would at least reveal himself, if not as who he was, then as who he was not.

LIKE A CANNY SUPERSTAR who controls his own image, Alexander granted the right to do his portrait to three artists of his time: Lysippos, a sculptor; Apelles, a renowned painter; and a gem cutter called Pyrgoteles. Surviving copies of Lysippos' work and other portraits, as well as literary descriptions, offer a consistent picture. Like Napoleon, Alexander was strikingly short, probably standing not much over five feet, and stockily built. He was famously good-looking, with a mane of long curling hair and fair skin that had "a ruddy tinge...especially upon his face and chest," according to Plutarch, who wrote a biography of Alexander in the first century A.D. He held his head slightly to the left and had a "melting look" in his eyes, traits that have led some modern doctors to suggest that he suffered from a rare eye condition known as Brown's syndrome. If this diagnosis is accurate, the characteristic tilt of Alexander's head enabled him to see straight.

Apparently unable to grow a full beard, he set a fashion for being clean-shaven. But his soft good looks belied a stubbornly competitive nature that was apparent even as a boy. "My father will be the first to win everything," Alexander complained to his playmates on learning that Philip had conquered a new city. "For me he will leave no great and brilliant action."

While it is Alexander who is known as "great," it was his father, Philip, one of the most brilliant generals of his day, who consolidated the kingdom of Macedonia and increased its wealth and status by conquest, trade, and astute alliances, often involving a politic marriage--at least seven in all. Philip's family had ruled Macedonia for more than 300 years, and the political organization of this absolute monarchy had far more in common with the tribal states of northern Greece than the city-states of the south. Indeed, by the fourth century B.C. such an "old world" monarchical kingdom with its regime of hunting, fighting, and drinking was regarded as an anachronism. "To other Greeks the Macedonians were barbarian, half wild," said historian Peter Green of the University of Iowa.

While Alexander owed much of his tactical genius to his father, emotionally he was closer to his mother, Olympias, a princess from Epirus, in northwest Greece. She was strong-willed, proud, and breathtakingly ruthless (shortly after Philip's death she roasted his last and youngest wife alive). Deeply religious, she was also a bacchante, a member of a female band who worshiped the god Dionysus through ecstatic, orgiastic revels; her handling of live snakes as part of these revels was said to have unnerved even Philip. From his mother Alexander acquired a

susceptibility to superstition and a cherished belief that he was a descendant of Achilles, the legendary hero of Homer's Iliad.

IN NORTHERN GREECE, less than an hour from modern Thessaloniki, lie the ruins of Pella, the Macedonian court and Philip's capital. The surrounding countryside is mountainous and wild, and it is not difficult to imagine the Macedonian nobility hunting and skirmishing on the wooded heights. Here Alexander was born around July 20, 356 B.C., and here he was to pass all but 11 years of his short life. Although the son of a king, his upbringing was spartan. Of an early mentor, Alexander used to say that his idea of breakfast was a long march at night, and of supper, a light breakfast. With the example of Philip and his companions constantly present, Alexander was reared among professional soldiers and hunters, hard-drinking roughriders. The code he learned young was that upheld by the warriors in his beloved Iliad: Glory in war was life's highest honor.

Despite some friction between them, Philip groomed his son to inherit the kingship. In 343 B.C. he acquired a former student of Plato's called Aristotle to be Alexander's tutor. "Aristotle was the son of a man who had been court physician under Philip's father," Ernst Badian, a professor emeritus at Harvard University, told me. "He was personally known to Philip and would 'know his place' in court society."

Philip's ultimate goal was to attack Persia, Greece's old enemy across the Aegean Sea. But in 336 B.C., at the age of 46, Philip was assassinated by a bodyguard, possibly his former lover (like most Greek upper-class men Philip was bisexual). Acting swiftly to forestall usurpers, the 20-year-old Alexander securely installed himself on his father's throne.

Two years later at the head of some 6,000 cavalry and 43,000 infantry, Alexander crossed the Hellespont, the strait now known as the Dardanelles, to Asia Minor. This was stage one of his grandiose campaign to fulfill Philip's ambition of taking Greek cities back from Persia, whose empire extended from modern Turkey to Pakistan. Officially Alexander claimed to be leading a Panhellenic campaign of vengeance for the Persian invasion of Greece in the days of Xerxes a century and a half earlier. In fact, his own Macedonians apart, few Greek troops joined the expedition.

Once across the Hellespont, Alexander set out for Troy, a site that had haunted his imagination since childhood. "He regarded the Iliad as a handbook of the art of war and took with him on his campaigns a text annotated by Aristotle," Plutarch writes, "which he always kept under his pillow together with a dagger." At the fallen walls of Troy, he and his closest companion, Hephaestion, paid tribute to the alleged tombs of Achilles and Patrolos--their self-styled alter egos--anointed altars with oil, and offered sacrifices.

Alexander's first engagement with the Persians took place northeast of Troy at the Granicus River (now the Kocabaş) in May 334 B.C. In the summer of my visit the riverbed lay dry and bare, helpfully exposing its terrain to clearer scrutiny. The yellow-green Granicus plain extended on both sides of the river, backed at some distance on the opposite shore by a low ridge. Here the Persians had arrayed themselves for battle, with up to 15,000 cavalymen in front and 16,000 infantry, a third of them Greek mercenaries, on the advantageous high ground behind.

Alexander, ignoring the advice of Philip's general Parmenio to delay attack, impetuously forged into the river and up the steep opposing bank to where the Persians waited. In hand-to-hand combat he and his men broke the enemy lines and surrounded the Greek mercenaries of the Persian king.

Many of the features of this first important victory were to be characteristic of victories to come. Alexander was directly helped by his father's legacy: In addition to having Philip's Companion Cavalry, he had the Macedonian phalanx, which had been refined by Philip into a highly mobile unit of foot soldiers equipped with wooden thrusting pikes up to 16 feet long. It was the length of these pikes--as much as nine feet longer than the average spear--that protected his men as they clambered up the riverbank from their vulnerable position below the enemy.

Above all else Alexander was a tactical genius, blessed with the gift of leadership. When he gave his command to make a frontal attack, he knew his men would confidently follow. "We have learned that the key to leadership under the toughest possible circumstances is that officers and men undergo the same training," Adm. Ray Smith told me of the notoriously demanding Navy SEALs regime. "Men know their officer is not asking them to do anything he couldn't do, or hasn't done.

Alexander instinctively honored this code. His ego and pride demanded that he be the best at everything. He himself had led the cavalry charge at Granicus, conspicuous in a white-plumed helmet. In particular his empathy for his men was a necessary part of the Macedonian warrior code.

"For the wounded he showed deep concern," wrote Arrian, the second century A.D. Greek historian whose account of Alexander's campaigns is considered one of the best of the ancient sources. "He visited them all and examined their wounds, asking each man how and in what circumstances his wound was received, and allowing him to tell his story and exaggerate as much as he pleased."

The battle of Granicus put the Persians on notice. While their forces fled inland, Alexander made a triumphant march along the coastline liberating the region's Greek cities from their Persian overlords. Ephesus, Magnesia, Priene, all were now free--on the condition, as one historian wryly observed, that they were obedient to Alexander.

After campaigning along the seaboard, Alexander turned inland to Gordium, then cut down toward the Mediterranean's eastern shore, relentlessly moving in on his prey, Darius III, King of Persia. They met at last outside Issus, near the present-day Turkish-Syrian border. Exhausted from a two-day march, his men were also outnumbered--a Macedonian force of about 50,000 to as many as 70,000 Persians. Nonetheless Alexander, rallying his troops, hastened to the confrontation, himself leading the charge into the Persian lines. Amid the dust and brawl of the battle Alexander spotted Darius in his war chariot and made straight for him, followed by his cavalry. When Darius fled, the battle was lost for the Persians.

Darius escaped, but the battle of Issus, fought in the fall of 333 B.C., made clear that Alexander was not a mere nuisance but a menace to Persia's might. Until now his main accomplishment had

consisted of overpowering and consolidating fractious Greek city-states and small tribes. Skeptical Persians could regard the victory at Granicus as a lucky fluke. But now the young Macedonian, at 23 years of age, had met the great King of Persia one-on-one and routed him. Additionally Darius had been forced to leave his baggage and his family at his camp. The Macedonians captured both, delighting in the extraordinary wealth of spoils but, on Alexander's orders, leaving the Persian king's wife and daughters unharmed.

FROM ISSUS Alexander headed down the Mediterranean coast, 'where city after city allied to Persia opened its gates and surrendered to him. He met his first significant resistance at Tyre, which was situated on an island half a mile offshore, a strategic site on account of its fabled sea power. Alexander's retinue included a special engineering unit much like the modern Seabees, and they began to construct a causeway to the island. It took the Macedonians seven months to gain the city, and when they did, they fell upon its inhabitants with determined fury. Seven thousand were slain outright, 2,000 young men crucified, and 30,000 sold into slavery.

"Blood was the characteristic of Alexander's whole campaign," Ernst Badian told me. "There is nothing comparable in ancient history except Caesar in Gaul."

Alexander continued south, neutralizing Persian allies, into Egypt. Here he was met with a riotous welcome. Egypt, once a mighty power, had been an unwilling vassal of Persia on and off for nearly 200 years. In Memphis, the Egyptian capital, Alexander was recognized as pharaoh, the legitimate ruler of the vast, wealthy, and ancient culture. And more: In Egyptian tradition, the pharaoh was the son of Amun-Re, the supreme god.

Far from the scant ruins of Memphis in the bleak Western Desert lies a lush oasis called Siwa. Here one twilight I made my way amid the jumble of mud-brick homes that form the small settlements of this remote desert island, up a short hill to a starkly simple, ancient building. In Alexander's day this had been the temple of Zeus-Amun--a melding of Greek and Egyptian deities--and the site of one of the most important oracles in the Greek world. Once across the sandy threshold I knew that I was standing, literally, in Alexander's footsteps.

Early in 331 B.C. Alexander the pharaoh had made a pilgrimage more than 300 miles across the blazing desert to this temple. For once there was no overriding military purpose to his excursion; susceptible as ever to omens and superstition, he had come to consult the oracle on a matter of great personal importance. "He... had a feeling that in some way he was descended from Amun," wrote Arrian. "He put his question to the oracle and received (or so he said) the answer which his heart desired." Only three years earlier Alexander had paid homage at Troy with what seems in retrospect almost naive enthusiasm for his belief that he was descended from Achilles. Now, at the age of 25, he was revered as divine by one of the most ancient civilizations on Earth.

In Egypt too Alexander left one of his most farsighted and enduring legacies--Alexandria, one of the greatest cities of its time. Today it is still a thriving cosmopolitan harbor city, with old world cafes, parks, and promenades encompassing its few remaining Greek and Roman ruins. Egyptians, Turks, Levantines, Nubians, Greeks and other Europeans crowd its streets and ethnic quarters. All this modern bustle came to be because 2,330 years ago in the spring of 331 B.C. Alexander, deploying his unerring instinct for the lay of the land, saw in the naked shoreline and

natural harbor the possibility of a mighty city. Outlining it in the shape of a chlamys, or military cloak, "he himself designed the general layout of the new town," says Arrian, "indicating the position of the market square, the number of temples., and the precise limits of its outer defenses.

After the battle of Issus, Darius had sent two letters to Alexander, offering grants of land and a daughter in marriage in exchange for peace; both letters were haughtily rejected. Darius, seeing there was no way out, resignedly prepared for all-out war. He reinforced and equipped his troops, drawing from the almost unlimited manpower of his vast empire.

The armies engaged on October 1,331 B.C., at Gaugamela, north of modern Baghdad--a battleground shared in a later age by the 1991 gulf war. ("Alexander would not have waited five months before launching an attack," a U.S. officer told me dryly.) Once again it was Darius who determined the battle arena, arraying his troops along a wide plain that was ideal for his outstanding cavalry and chariots equipped with lethal scythes. From high ground Alexander had gazed at the immense army that so outnumbered his: Bactrians, Dahae, Arachosians, Parthians, Medes, Indians, Babylonians, Mardians--the Persian cavalry, perhaps 34,000 strong, outnumbered his by five to one. Taken aback by the spectacle before him, Alexander checked his characteristic impulse to make an immediate attack. First conducting a minute examination of the terrain, he convened his officers for a pep talk, then gave orders for his men to rest and eat, while he went to bed.

"When his officers came to him in the early morning, they were astonished to find him not yet awake," wrote Plutarch of the morning before the most important battle of Alexander's life. While Alexander slept, Darius and his men had maintained their strategic position on the plain, standing at nervous attention in their resplendent armor throughout the night. The Macedonians assembled facing Darius, who was dead center in his line of formation, surrounded by bodyguards. On command the Macedonians advanced in perfect order, with Alexander on the right; but instead of moving straight ahead, their line swung out, placing Alexander at the tip of a wedge, facing Darius. Alexander, knowing he was utterly outflanked anyway, had decided to lure Darius to his wings, then attack the weakened Persian center. The ploy worked. With both flanks desperately engaged--his cavalry at one point held its own against a Persian force ten times its strength--Alexander spotted the anticipated fatal weakening in the enemy line. Charging at the head of his Companion Cavalry, he broke through, cutting Darius off from his second-in-command. As at Issus, Darius fled, and Alexander won the day.

"Alexander's tactics were offensive," Col. Cole Kingseed, a military historian at West Point's U.S. Military Academy, told me. "He anticipated what the enemy would do, forced the enemy to react to him. Alexander went with the arm of decision--that's one thing we stress, that the commander's place is where the decisive action is.

AFTER GAUGAMELA Alexander marched to Babylon and later Susa, receiving a reinforcement of 15,000 Greek troops along the way. By January 330 B.C. Alexander had reached Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of Persia. The handsome remains of the magnificent palace complex can still be visited today, set on a bluff overlooking a harsh, barren landscape--

and the extravagant tents erected in 1971 by the last shah of Iran for the celebration of the Persian monarchy's 2,500th anniversary.

Alexander turned the city over to his troops. With unrestrained violence they looted its rich art and killed adult males. Later Alexander torched the palaces. "The story that Alexander burned Persepolis by accident in a drunken orgy is untrue," my guide told me. "The archaeologists found that the fire was not haphazard but started in the quarter known as Xerxes' palace." Perhaps this was in part a gesture to the Greek troops, vengeance for Persia's attacks on their homelands in the fifth century.

With the holiest city of the Persians in hand, along with its treasury of perhaps 100,000 talents of gold (worth billions of dollars today), Alexander was lord of Asia. There was one loose end to tie up; Darius still remained at large, reportedly in Ecbatana, southwest of modern Tehran. When Alexander reached the city, Darius was gone. By forced marches in blistering heat Alexander pressed urgently ahead, driving his troops so hard that men and horses fell by the wayside. Then another unsettling report: Darius had been arrested by Bessus, the ruler of Bactria and claimant to the Persian throne.

In relentless pursuit, Alexander caught up with the abandoned Persian baggage train and began a frantic search for Darius. One of Alexander's men noticed a wagon that had meandered off the trail, pulled by two wounded oxen. Curious, he looked inside to find Darius shackled and mortally wounded, a single loyal dog at his side. Having drunk some water brought by the sympathetic Greek soldier, Darius died.

"When Alexander came up, he showed his grief and distress at the king's death, and unfastening his own cloak, he threw it over the body," wrote Plutarch. An aristocrat to his fingertips, Alexander was in his way respectful of other kings; he may even have looked forward to exercising his magnanimity, as he had done toward Darius's women. Darius's body was returned to Persepolis for burial, while Alexander led his army to the nearby city of Hecatompylus for a much needed rest.

Here the rumor spread among his weary men that the campaign was ended and they were going home. Alarmed, Alexander assembled his generals and, according to first-century A.D. Roman historian Curtius, "with tears in his eyes, complained that he was being brought to a halt in the middle of a brilliant career." Later Alexander chose men of noble birth from his Persian captives to be trained as administrators of captured territory; his fellow Macedonians had revealed their limitations, and he was shrewdly preparing new subordinates for the next stage of his apparently endless campaign.

Alexander now turned his attention to further Asian conquests and the rebel Bessus, who had retreated from the rugged hill country of Bactria into neighboring Sogdiana. Alexander's year-long pursuit of Bessus took him into the wild northern fringes of the Persian Empire, through treacherous and unknown terrain. From the high snowbound passes of the Hindu Kush, north across the Oxus River into the blistering plains of Sogdiana, his increasingly unhappy men succumbed to frostbite, altitude sickness, and heat. The huge territory he had so far conquered had been known to the Greek world from advance reports made by traders, diplomats, and

soldiers. Knowledge of the geography and people of the lands that lay ahead, however, was obscure and confused.

In the summer of 329 B.C. Bessus was arrested by his own panic-stricken allies and turned over to Alexander, who ordered him stripped naked and tied to a post beside the road to endure the jeers of passing troops. Eventually he was mutilated and dismembered--a Persian traitor's death. Alexander intended this severe treatment to show his new Persian associates that he had righteously avenged Darius, the implication being that he, Alexander, was the rightful lord of Asia.

BUT ALEXANDER'S CAMPAIGN in Central Asia did not end with the death of Bessus. Unexpectedly, a more challenging foe arose in the person of a Bactrian noble called Spitamenes, who joined forces with nomadic horsemen from the north to harry Alexander's men by making lightning attacks and then retreating into the steppe. These attacks caught the men at a vulnerable time. Worn out from the debilitating march that had brought them into this new territory, veterans from his father's army, along with Thessalian volunteers, petitioned Alexander to be sent home. Dangerously short of manpower, Alexander had no option but to recruit from the local Bactrians he had recently subdued.

"Alexander kept his army supplied by recruiting from the enemy," Nicholas Hammond of Cambridge University said. "The fact that he could successfully do this speaks volumes about his leadership." Despite their diverse nationalities his troops remained remarkably loyal.

Alexander's entry into the northern frontier country accompanied a series of incidents that indicate a dark shift in his character. As the composition of his army changed, bitter tensions arose between the new recruits and the old guard. Alexander adopted modified Persian dress and customs, to the distress of the Macedonians--distress that Alexander, increasingly paranoid, was quick to read as evidence of disloyalty, punishable by death. A number of old companions fell victim to his suspicions: the aged Parmenio, Philip's loyal general, and Parmenio's son; Cleitus, who had saved Alexander's life at Granicus; and Callisthenes, Aristotle's nephew--all were either executed or murdered. In Hyrcania on the Caspian Sea Alexander was given a eunuch named Bagoas, whom he made his lover. While the Macedonians took bisexual relationships in stride, the unnatural effeminacy of the beautiful eunuch may have offended them.

More offensive to the Macedonians was Alexander's insistence on the practice of proskynesis. In a form of adoration that the Greeks reserved for the gods but which the Persians bestowed on their king, the worshiper kissed and prostrated himself before Alexander. Catering to Persian tastes was pragmatic, as Alexander needed Persian loyalty and manpower for future conquest, but such extravagant practices clearly also suited his belief in his divine descent.

"In his honor myrrh and other kinds of incense were consumed in smoke; a religious stillness and silence born of fear held fast all who were in his presence," reported Ephippus, a writer contemporary with Alexander. "For he was intolerable, and murderous, reputed in fact to be melancholy mad." Ominously, he was drinking heavily.

In early 327 B.C., with Alexander closing in, Spitamenes was run to ground and assassinated by his own allies, and his head was brought to Alexander as a peace offering. That spring, still combating sporadic rebellions, Alexander captured a mountain stronghold of the Sogdians and took Roxane, the daughter of the captured leader, as his wife. Accounts state that he was smitten with the beauty of the girl, who was perhaps 12 at the time, but the marriage was also another pragmatic move, making a powerful ally out of one of his most troublesome enemies.

Shortly afterward Alexander wrapped up the two-year campaign in Central Asia, leaving behind him a string of military garrisons manned by both Greek-speaking and "barbarian" forces.

IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM in London I studied an improbable image on a small, worn coin: a tiny man on a prancing horse brandishing a pike at a departing elephant. This coin was struck to commemorate one of Alexander's most difficult and brilliant victories, in the region known to him as India (now northeast Pakistan). According to the wisdom of his time it lay close to the all-encircling ocean--at the farthest end of Earth.

In the spring of 327 B.C. Alexander led his army of perhaps 75,000 troops, of whom only 15,000 were now Macedonians, back over the Hindu Kush. By June of the following year he was at the banks of the Hydaspes (now Jhelum) River, preparing to meet one of the most formidable adversaries of his career. Porus, who stood nearly seven feet tall, was the ruler of extensive territory in the Punjab. Across the river he had arrayed his 50,000 infantry troops, cavalry, and war elephants, especially fearsome to the Macedonians' horses. From this defensive position he awaited Alexander. "Porus himself rode an elephant which towered above the other beasts," wrote Curtius. "His armor, with its gold and silver inlay, lent distinction to his unusually large physique."

Under the eyes of his watchful enemy, Alexander-determined to create as much confusion as possible--drilled his men up and down the riverbank as if preparing for action. Campfires were lit erratically. To the watching Indians, the Macedonians seemed to be perpetually on the brink of a decisive action. Eventually tiring of false alarms, Porus pulled many of his night watches, and Alexander saw his opportunity.

His scouts had found the ideal crossing 17 miles upriver, where a wooded island masked the river. Dividing his forces into three distinct groups, Alexander led the crossing under cover of night aided by a severe thunderstorm, and he appeared before Porus at dawn. Concealing part of his cavalry, Alexander led the rest in a charge, counting on the fact that Porus would commit his forces to what appeared to be an easy win. When Porus took the bait, the hidden cavalry engaged, and Alexander was joined by his other contingents. Amid the mud, the rain, and the trumpeting of the elephants, the Macedonians surrounded Porus, who, wounded, made a slow retreat on his war elephant and was soon captured.

When Porus was brought before Alexander and asked how he wished to be treated, he replied simply, "Like a king." These were words Alexander understood, and he restored Porus to his kingdom on the condition that he remain loyal to Alexander. Impatient to continue to where the end of the world beckoned, Alexander paused to found a city, Bucephala, in memory of the

beloved horse that had died shortly after the battle---of wounds or perhaps old age. Bucephalas had been with Alexander from his boyhood.

It was the monsoon season, and Alexander's men were demoralized by the incessant rain. On the banks of the Hyphasis (now Beas) River, some distance farther east, Alexander's troops at last rebelled, ending the dream of world conquest. "Alexander was basically screwed by ignorance of geography," Peter Green told me. "He had been telling his men, We'll just go over the hill, boys-- and then suddenly he had the whole of the Ganges plain before him." The geographers were wrong; there was no end of the world in sight. Exhausted and wounded and with the memory of elephants shrieking amid the mud and bloody confusion of Hydaspes, their most nightmarish battle, Alexander's men, for the first and only time, refused him. Enraged, Alexander, taking a cue from the Iliad, sulked Achilles-like for three days in his tent. When his men did not budge, he emerged to consult the omens, which conveniently indicated that he should turn back. Alexander would bow to gods but not to men.

The return to Persia saw Alexander at his most savage. Establishing Greek garrisons at key points along the way, he eliminated all resistance by what can only be called genocide. It was as if, having learned the world was too big to conquer, he struck in compensation at everything in his way. As Harvard's Badian says, "In the end Alexander didn't establish anything lasting in India. By his death most of his conquests there had already been lost."

At a point north of modern Karachi Alexander divided his troops. Some, under the command of his boyhood friend Nearchus, sailed from the Indian Ocean into the Persian Gulf. He himself led others across the Gedrosia desert, straddling Pakistan and Iran. With little food, no fodder for the animals, and water scarce or undrinkable, Alexander's men and their retinues fell along the way. This retreat was the most costly campaign Alexander waged. Perhaps 85,000 people, including the baggage train, entered the desert; as few as 25,000 came out.

During this retreat what ancient historians regarded as one of his most noble deeds took place. A scouting party had found a trickle of brackish water and brought some back in a helmet to their king. Alexander "took the helmet, and in full view of the troops poured the water on the ground" writes Arrian. He would not drink if his men could not.

On an August evening I arrived in Ahwaz, an Iranian desert city close to the Iraqi border. The temperature at six in the evening was 124 ° F. Some 60 miles north of the city lie the ruins of Susa, the winter capital of the Persian Empire. It is now a blasted site, fiat brown earth with tufts of green weed and shrub poking from the mud-brick palace foundation, the few flagstones, and the shattered chunks of fluted columns.

Alexander returned to Susa from the desert in March 324 B.C. Soon afterward he welcomed the arrival of some 30,000 Persian noble youths who, on his orders, had been taught Greek and instructed in Macedonian warfare. Potential replacements for his aging inner circle of Macedonians, he called them the Successors. In the same season Alexander held a mass wedding for himself and more than 80 other Macedonian officers to Persian noblewomen. He himself took two wives, one a daughter of Darius. Persia, not Greece, was now his base of operations.

Despite the setback at the Hyphasis River his ambition remained undiminished, and he began plans to conquer Arabia, and perhaps Carthage, or Italy....

SOMETIME IN THE AUTUMN of that year, in Ecbatana, Hephaestion, his companion since boyhood, took ill and died of undetermined causes. Alexander's grief was extravagant; Hephaestion had been Patroklos to his Achilles, and he now mourned his friend in heroic fashion--and crucified Hephaestion's unfortunate physician. Alexander's own health was impaired by a brutal chest wound received in India--one of many injuries--and he was subject to the mood swings and murderous rages of an alcoholic.

But in early 323 B.C. Alexander set out for Babylon to prepare for the Arabian expedition. At a banquet on May 29 he was gripped with abdominal pain and retired to his quarters. Over the next two weeks he was taken with fever, and although able to make sacrifices to the gods and conduct intermittent business, he never left his bed. His troops, terrified by rumors that he was already dead insisted on seeing him with their own eyes.

"Nothing could keep them from the sight of him, and the motive in almost every heart was grief and a sort of helpless bewilderment at the thought of losing their king," Arrian records. "Lying speechless as the men filed by, he struggled to raise his head, and in his eyes there was a look of recognition for each individual as he passed."

On June 10, 323 B.C., Alexander died. Modern science attributes his death variously to drink, malaria, or a perforated ulcer. Recently it has been suggested that a rare symptom of typhoid fever called ascending paralysis may have been the cause of death. If so, he would have appeared to have been dead for some time before he actually was, accounting for the ancient sources' observation that his body did not begin to decompose until days after his death. He was just short of his 33rd birthday.

Centuries after Alexander's death the Roman Emperor Augustus expressed astonishment that "Alexander did not regard it as a greater task to set in order the empire which he had won than to win it." But Alexander's white-hot ambition had been for conquest, pure and simple, not administration. Nevertheless, the cultural landscape of the East had been changed in the wake of his conquests, and his death marked a new era. The Hellenistic Age, which spread Greek culture and language throughout the East, lasted from the year of his death until Ptolemaic Egypt fell to Rome in 31 B.C.

Before turning back from the Hyphasis River, Alexander is said to have erected an extraordinary monument to his campaign, no trace of which has ever been found. It consisted of 12 altars to an eclectic collection of gods, Greek and eastern, and a brass obelisk bearing the simple words: "Alexander stopped here."

MAP: Fleeting Empire, Alexander led an army into Asia Minor in 334 B.C. to liberate Greek cities ruled by Persia and avenge the Persian invasion of Greece 150 years earlier. By consent or by carnage, he took lands from Egypt to what was then India, where his men mutinied. Enraged, Alexander turned back. He never made it home, dying of fever, some say of poison, in Babylon

in 323 B.C. Built on the shaky foundation of conquest, his empire fragmented into rival successor kingdoms.

PHOTO (COLOR): A muscled Macedonian youth astride his marble steed evokes the mythic grandeur of Alexander III of Macedon. Claiming descent from Greek heroes and gods, this young king in the fourth century B.C. launched a campaign of conquest, vengeance, and personal glory that forged one of the world's largest-and most fragile-empires.

PHOTO (COLOR): Dawn reveals in stark relief the ruins of the temple of the oracle of Zeus-Amun in the Siwa Oasis of Egypt, where a lone night watchman tends his fire on a path once trod by Alexander. Hailed for ending Persian oppression in Egypt, Alexander in 332 B.C. was accepted as pharaoh, a god incarnate. Hoping to confirm his divine status-and secure favorable omens for an invasion of Asia-Alexander trekked to the famed oracle at Siwa. He was greeted as the son of Amun-Re, a title that fueled his growing sense of invincibility.

PHOTO (COLOR): The sure gaze of schoolgirl Nasreen Bibi looks toward a future as hazy as her people's past. Her kin, the Kalash of northwestern Pakistan's Hindu Kush, claim to be descendants of Alexander's troops, who fought throughout this region. A famous ancient tale tells of Alexander's bacchanal with mountain dwellers claiming descent from Dionysus. They were likely the forebears of the Kalash, who still worship a pantheon of gods, make wine, practice animal sacrifice-and resist conversion to Islam.

PHOTO (COLOR): Exquisitely carved in ivory, a bearded Dionysus frolics with Pan and a lady love-a light touch in a boy's tomb in ancient Macedonia's earliest capital, Aigai, now Vergina. The boy may have been Alexander's son, murdered in a power struggle after his father's death. Belief in divine roots ran deep in Alexander, who claimed kinship with Zeus, the Greek hero Heracles, and the great Homeric warrior Achilles-whom Alexander idolized and aspired to surpass.

PHOTO (COLOR): A Father's Royal Legacy, Peering with grim intensity, Philip II of Macedon comes to life in a speculative reconstruction based on ancient bones. Blinded in one eye by an enemy's arrow, Philip was an insightful leader unrivaled by any but his famous son, Alexander. In 359 B.C., at about age 23, Philip became king of Macedonia, a jumble of fractious clans. He built a mighty army, well drilled and armed with 16-foot pikes called sarissae. With shrewd diplomacy and brute force, Philip conquered much of Greece and became head of a Greek league formed to invade Asia Minor. In 336 B.C. an assassin's sword ended Philip's life-leaving the invasion to his ambitious son.

PHOTO (COLOR): In 1977 archaeologists unearthed a tomb at Vergina. It held a perforated bronze lantern (right), perhaps designed to protect the flame from splashes when the corpse was washed.

PHOTO (COLOR): A gold larnax with a Macedonian star (left) held charred remains

PHOTO (COLOR): adorned with a regal wreath of gold oak leaves and acorns (left). Scholars believe the tomb held the bones of either Philip II or Philip III. Scientists at the University of

Manchester in England used the skull for their portrait of the king who laid the foundation for Alexander's conquests.

PHOTO (COLOR): At the foot of Mount Olympus, the thundering gallop of a stallion recalls a famous tale of Alexander's youth. Here, in the fields of Greece, Alexander mounted and rode a spirited horse that Philip had proclaimed unmanageable. Seeing his son's triumph, Philip said, "My boy, seek a kingdom to match yourself. Macedonia is not large enough to hold you." The horse, Bucephalas, carried Alexander to conquests on three continents. After dying of wounds at age 30 in Central Asia, by ancient accounts, Bucephalas had a royal funeral.

PHOTO (COLOR): Inseparable in art as in life, Alexander and Bucephalas face eternal battle in ancient bronze. A handsome man with flowing locks, Alexander wielded his intense charisma like a sword to inspire and intimidate his troops. In all his victories Alexander led the calvary charge, which often proved decisive. Fearless, even reckless, he once self-servingly told his men, "There is no part of my body . . . which has not a scar. . . and all for your sakes, for your glory and your gain.

PHOTO (COLOR): The toppled marble of Athena's temple at Priene on the Turkish coast marks once sacred ground for ancient Greeks--and for their Macedonian king. Tutored by Aristotle and enthralled by Homer's Iliad, Alexander visited Priene shortly after his first Asian victory the defeat of Persia's army at the Granicus River in 334 B.C. This temple was under construction, and Alexander was granted his request to dedicate the shrine to Athena- an honor earlier denied at Ephesus, wounding his colossal pride. Pragmatically devout, Alexander made daily sacrifices to sway the gods.

PHOTO (COLOR): Preserved in hieroglyphs of stone, Alexander's tale adorns the walls of the temple in Luxor, Egypt. Damaged by Persian conquerors, it was restored by Alexander, whose public worship of Egyptian gods earned him adulation. Pharaoh at age 25, he founded Alexandria on Egypt's Mediterranean shore.

PHOTO (COLOR): Depicted as a ship-crowned woman in ancient art (right), this pivotal port became the cultural heart of the Hellenistic Age--the 300 years following Alexander's death.

PHOTO (COLOR): The lapis eyes of an Achaemenid prince found in the ruins of Persepolis bore blind witness to his city's horror in 330 B.C. Called Parsa by the Persian dynasty that built it, Persepolis was a holy city founded by Darius the Great, who had invaded Greece in the fifth century B.C.

PHOTO (COLOR): Here Persia's kings received tribute from subject lands. Repository of riches, it was sacked with Alexander's blessing. Its citizens were butchered and its palaces torched. This desecration by a violent usurper of the Achaemenid throne fueled hatred for the man still known in Iran as Alexander the Accursed.

PHOTO (COLOR): Peaceful trade belies the violent past of Heart, where an imposing citadel rises from the ruins of a fort built by Alexander. Here in the ancient province of Areia began the first bloody uprising against Alexander's regime. Because of the region's strategic importance-

and to stem dissent elsewhere-Alexander quickly and brutally quelled the revolt. He then founded Alexandria Areion, now Heart, the first of many eastern garrison towns established to defend conquered lands, encourage trade, and house troops weary of war.

PHOTO (COLOR): Hushed and tranquil for a leisurely dip, the Jhelum River was a raging hell in 326 B.C. Swollen with monsoon rains, the river lay between Alexander and his foe, Indian King Porus. With characteristic cunning Alexander divided his army to confuse the enemy and led an assault force upriver.

PHOTO (COLOR): They crossed at night in relentless rain. Duped by Alexander's maneuvers, Porus's army fell. His fearsome war elephants rampaged in agony, pierced with spears. So horrific was the mud, blood, and chaos that Alexander's men began a slide toward mutiny. This was his last great battle.

PHOTO (COLOR): A caravan crosses a landscape of death in Pakistan's Gedrosia desert. With costly hubris Alexander marched much of his army through these blistering sands. Steered inland by the Makran Coast Range, at top, they faced a wilderness without forage and with little water. Thousands died of starvation, thirst, and heat. Most women, children, and pack animals drowned in a flash flood. The march took 60 days and some 60,000 lives, "poor castaways in the ocean of sand," wrote historian Arrian. It was Alexander's worst defeat.

PHOTO (COLOR): Imbued with a godly aura in later Greek sculpture (facing page), Alexander seemingly gained in death what he had sought in life: divinity. Even before his death at age 32 in 323 B.C., many Greek cities recognized Alexander as a god-an honor he undoubtedly encouraged. Ironically, his rising paranoia, despotism, and demands for obeisance alienated the Macedonian troops who had laid Asia at his feet.

PHOTO (COLOR): Staring from a tomb of snow, the massive head of a stone god surveys Nemrud Dag in Turkey. King Antiochus I of Commagene built this eerie shrine as his burial place, adorning it with oddly blended Greco-Persian gods. Claiming kinship with both Alexander and Persia's Achaemenids, Antiochus in some ways symbolized the Hellenistic Age, when Greek language and culture linked lands from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Indus Valley in the east. Such was the unwitting legacy of Alexander-a king whose only goal was conquest.

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By Caroline Alexander

Photographs by James L. Satnfield

## **VICTORY AT GAUGAMELA**

The clash of arms at Gaugamela reverberates to this day. There Alexander displayed the military genius that was his greatest gift. Against heavy odds he routed the Persian army of Darius III in a battle still studied by strategists. The victory enabled Alexander to march triumphant through Persia's heart.

Darius chose the plain of Gaugamela for his fateful stand. He cleared away hills and trees, the better to use his cavalry and chariots. Ancient historians and modern scholars suggest that Alexander deployed some 40,000 infantry and 7,000 cavalry in an oblique rectangular formation, facing a polyglot Persian force perhaps five times as large.

October 1, 331 B.C. In glorious armor Alexander assemble and exhorts his troops. Leading his elite Companion Cavalry on the right flank, Alexander moves his army right 1. To draw Darius toward uncleared ground. Persia's crack Bactrian cavalry takes the bait and engages Alexander's right flank 2. Darius orders deadly scythed chariots into action, but Alexander's disciplined troops merely move aside, the close in, allowing archers and javelin men to dispatch the drivers 3. Nearly encircled on the left, Macedonian general Parmenio holds ground in a desperate defensive fight 4. Alexander's reinforcements on the right draw more Persian cavalry away from the center. There the enemy line thins, almost Imperceptibly. Alexander sees his chance. Like a raptor he swoops into the breach 5, leading the wedge point of charge, then aims for Darius. Chaos ensues. Alexander's tightly packed phalanxes, bristling with pikes move forward en masse. The Persian line collapses. With defeat sealed, Darius flees. Alexander pursues him but soon returns for a vicious final engagement with the remaining Persian troops.

Accounts of what occurred in the roiling dust of that decisive day vary in detail. It's clear that thousands died. Darius, disgraced, fled eastward. And Alexander, proclaimed lord of Asia set his sights on Persia's lavish capitals.

DIAGRAM: Victory at Guagamela

PHOTO (COLOR)

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